

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF RHODE ISLAND

Dr. William R. Holland Commissioner of Higher Education

The Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education has a statutory responsibility to approve a master plan defining broad goals for higher education in the state. My purpose in this article is to acquaint the citizens of Rhode Island with the higher education agenda during the next few years.

A master plan outlining six key priorities was approved by the Board in October 1999. The plan's main purpose is to provide direction and focus to institutional planning at our University and colleges. The President, faculty and staff at each school are expected to respond annually to these initiatives and align their resources, staffing, and future planning to the Board's priorities.

Many times, a listing of broad goals by a public body receives little attention. The true value of such a planning document lies in how it affects decision-making. A strategic plan must be kept fresh and "alive" and used regularly as a dependable compass that is understood and respected by all parties.

Let's look behind the broad statements of goals and at the thinking that led to the six priority planning areas identified by the Board of Governors for the next three to five years:

ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY - More Rhode Islanders are viewing higher education as a means of upward social and economic mobility. The influx of minority populations with low literacy levels, low income and poor educational preparation is expected to increase significantly in Rhode Island during the next decade. Higher education costs have consistently been above the rate of inflation in the last decade, and student education debt is still a major concern. Yet, the ability of all Rhode Islanders to afford higher education and to gain access through improved college preparation and financial assistance is increasingly a major challenge. Higher education is no longer a four-year proposition but a 40-year situation because the growing need for job retraining, continuing education, and preparation for career change in our technologically driven New Economy is forcing higher education to expand its mission and its market. A coordinated seamless higher education system is still needed to gain a degree or certificate and secure a good job; however, more flexible paths for learning are emerging as people move in and out of the higher education system. The role of our community college with its open enrollment policy is critical. The need for an effective and relatively painless transfer and articulation process to allow students to move smoothly on to our university and college is, therefore, a high priority.

FISCAL AND FACILITIES PLANNING - With an economic resurgence, Rhode Island has improved its overall commitment to higher education in recent years, especially with capital project initiatives. The support of the Governor and the General Assembly and the voters in improving the infrastructure of CCRI, URI, and RIC and undertaking major new construction projects has been most impressive and acknowledges the critical role of higher education to the future of our state. However, within the last decade, RI still ranks in the bottom 20% in its annual general fund appropriation for higher education (regardless of the source for data). (K-12 educational funding, on the other hand, has received significant attention.) Higher education enrollment has remained fairly stable, and any new higher education dollars have come from modest tuition/fee increases, the so-called institutional income in the budget. Fiscal planning, therefore, has become a matter of doing more with less along with attracting external funding. Creative fiscal planning over a three- to five-year term is essential if we are to stretch our resources effectively, use our money well, link our resources to our priorities, and remain competitive in the higher education market -- especially in the areas of faculty salaries, research support, technology, and facilities improvement.

TEACHER PREPARATION - Real dividends can be realized by undertaking a serious initiative in higher education to improve the quality of our beginning teachers. When better-prepared students enter our three public institutions, there will be a reduction in remedial costs, increased retention rates, and higher graduation rates. PreK-16 collaboration between higher education and elementary and secondary education also means improving the quality of teaching currently in Rhode Island schools especially by supporting the standards-based instruction reform currently underway in our state's classrooms. The true measure of our success, however, will be the results over the next five to ten years. Results will be illustrated by a variety of accountability measures that measure the academic performance of Rhode Island students as well as national

In conclusion, an ambitious agenda has been established for higher education in Rhode Island over the next few years. The challenges are formidable, especially fiscally. However, in the final analysis, failure by our state to build and support a strong, effective public system of higher education will negatively affect the quality of life of all Rhode Islanders.